Transcript

Jack Du 00:33
I had been a high school teacher for the past 5 years, and I started the Mandarin program at our school. I taught Mandarin for 5 years, and it just appears to me that language teaching and learning, although it sort of has moved towards the digital format, it's not terribly effective. The current kind of tools that we use, we use Quizlet, Kahoot, that sort of stuff, but they're strictly complementary tools, and they're not particularly versatile, like you have to use a lot of other tools with that. The current existing tools, such as Babbel and Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, they claim to be stand-alone sort of thing that can teach you the language. But we actually don't use them very, very often because pedagogically it's not that fantastic, so I'll give an example. Lisa is a friend of mine. She actually studied Japanese at university, and she's a polyglot. She went to Italy in 2019, and to fully enjoy the wonderful food and culture Italy has to offer, she spent 2 months learning Italian on Duolingo. When she arrived at the Milan airport, standing in front of a cafe, she realized that she didn't know how to order a cappuccino, although she could say, "Man eats bread," in perfect Italian. Lisa is not alone because hundreds of millions of language learners around the world struggle to really turn this learning into everyday fluency because the apps that they use usually lack in 3 areas, that is **communication, immersion, and gamification**. So that is what we're trying to do, which is basically the answer to the second question. *Last Abroad* at its very core is a language learning game that focuses on communication, immersion, and gamification along with pedagogy, and I'll expand them a little bit, one by one.

Jack Du 3:11
So with communication, we all know that the ultimate goal of learning a language is to be able to communicate, right? But most of the apps teach vocab and some teach grammar, but they're not usually communication focused, so say Duolingo'll teach you a word, like "man" and "bread," but you can't communicate with just these two words, and then they teach you grammar to put them into a sentence and then you can say, like "man eats bread," but that's equally useless 'cause you never use that, right? For us, we will take a communication-first approach, so if there is a word that you won't use, we won't teach it. For example, we teach numbers because they're useful in asking about time and when talking about price. Then we can use that to teach you to make plans with your friends or buy stuff in the shop, so everything is there for a reason. We want to teach you to be able to say things and actually use the language in real life. It's kind of like a warm up exercise, before flexing your linguistic muscles in a foreign country. So that's the first principle that we have.

Jack Du 4:40
And immersion is the second one. True immersion is very rare in language learning apps. There are some, like VR, stuff that is like coming up. There's a New Zealand company called *Immerse Me*, they do a bit of that, and then there is *Mondly*, but it's like on the Google Play Store. Usually they just throw you into a bit of an immersive environment and then you have to say a few things, as if you are communicating with people, but that's lacking pedagogy because it doesn't

really tell you what that means, and there's no logical kind of progression in terms of language learning.

Jack Du 5:37
But by far the majority of the apps out there are not immersive, so Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, Babble, they're kind of, in my humble opinion, glorified flash cards because what they do is they ask you to match words with translation, rearrange them to form sentences, so if you printed that out, it's no different from flash cards. It's very traditional and repetitive. Imagine if you're in a foreign country, there's no cards with the translation of coffee just for you to match with the real coffee you wanna order, right? We want to change that, and we'll create a virtual game world where you actually pick up the world's words and structures from the environment, and then you speak to the people, and then you complete meaningful tasks with the things that you just learned, as you would in the real world.Everything you learn has a purpose, and a context as well, and then you'll know exactly when and how to use them, when you want to, so that's immersion.

Jack Du 7:00
Gamification is a big one 'cause learning is a taxing task and especially if people have to finish work and come home. If it's not fun, people are not going to use it, right? So apps are trying to address that by using a kind of extrinsic motivation, like Duolingo has hearts and winning streaks, there's some stuff, and for some people, it's addictive. But, personally, I feel like it's in a soul degrading manner because it's designed based on Pavlovian conditioning, and the core belief that I have is that true gamification should be about amplifying the intrinsic fun in the task that you're doing already.

Jack Du 8:00
Learning should be fun, whatever that learning is. It's like people like trigonometry and physics. It's hard, right? There's something fun in there in the first place for someone to even create that as a subject, right? There has to be something fun, and that if you focus and amplify the intrinsic fun of a subject, then even after playing the game, you can still go on and learn a language and then enjoy the same kind of fun in that it's a continuous sort of growth.

Jack Du 8:40
If you just sugar coat and pump a lot of artificially found mechanisms in the game, then once you finish that, it's not present in real life. That's a little bit disappointing. I have seen a lot of game designers trying to design learning games, and they're not doing it right because they're like, "oh, let's design an adventure game, and then if you click on the right thing and then you do the attack, or if you picked up the right thing, you do with the defense. It has actually nothing to do with learning, but it's like SO divorced from the actual learning process. For us, it's like, what is the most fun in learning a language? We actually have done a lot of research on this by talking to people who have learned languages and especially polyglots who really enjoy learning and mastering languages and there are a few of them. By far the most important of them, the self-causation, is to be able to use what you just learned and use that to complete a real life kind of task, to do something with your language. That's the most important thing 'cause it basically

opens the door to a brand new world because then you can understand people, you can learn the culture. You just feel good 'cause it's like suddenly you can see the difference that you make. So that's probably, by far, the biggest motivation, and this is how we're going to design a game. It's like pick up things in the game; immediately you need to complete the in-game task. You may need to order a couple of drinks, you may need to order in a restaurant and have some food, or complete some tasks in the game, all by using this stuff that you've just learned. It creates an immediate use for it. You can experiment with different things. There is the encouragement to communicate, so that goes back to the communication first approach, so that's the key thing. Then pedagogy is kind of the thing behind the scenes that I do a lot of design in as well, like scaffolding, like a natural progression of language, because you can't teach the complicated stuff if you don't teach the simple stuff. Then there is also the personalization because people are at different levels, so you got to subtly pretest them, whether you're not really testing testing or at least you don't make them feel like you're testing them, because if you test things that people don't know, it's discouraging, but we want to know where they are at.

Jack Du 11:50
Then you can personalize their learning experiences. We're going to be collecting data all the way through, how well people complete tasks and stuff, and if they don't do well in a certain task, we'll give them more of the same type of tasks. So what they're doing is they're playing a game, but actually they're unknowingly improving their weaknesses because we're throwing all of the tasks in there to help them get better. It's also based on researching language learning, which I can talk about.

Jack Du 12:37
When I was a teacher, I have done quite a bit of research in human motivation theories. There is *Educational Psychology* by McInerney and McInerney. They have a list of all kinds of things that alert us when we really want to learn something, like that's the right level of challenge, like your curiosity, like self conception feedback, and all kinds of stuff. Our design is very tightly aligned with that, but then there is also language learning specific theories. There is a New Zealand educator called, well I'm from New Zealand, so that's why I have all these New Zealand examples, but the Ministry of Education actually promotes. There is a guy called Rod Ellis, and he has the Ten Principles of Language Learning. We're using a lot of that. I also have real classroom teaching experience. I know what are the things that work and what are the things that don't and what are the common kinds of struggles that students have when learning a language, so I'm going to be using that. There was a lot of primary research that I have done, basically conducting interviews with language learners to find out what is fun about learning a language, what's the purpose of them learning the language, what do they want to get out of that.